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Helen van Dongen

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HELEN VAN DONGEN

Robert J. Flaherty 1884-1951

Who was Robert J. Flaherty? To casual acquaintances he was an exuberant man, witty, a born raconteur, always surrounded by an attentive audience eagerly listening to his tales of far-away lands and people. This image was reinforced by the many stories about his character, his habits and exploits.

Our interviewers and reporters, by choice or assignment, select as subjects people who make a good story. They find it necessary to create a personality with mass-appeal. It makes "good reading" but the resulting impressions often have no relation to the person or his achievements.

Flaherty was indeed impressive to look at. His great bulk, his broad shoulders, his pink face with deep blue eyes, and his massive head with the fringe of flowing white hair invited exaggerations and inventions about him and his idiosyncrasies. Flaherty himself lent, unwittingly, generous support to such stories and never did anything to correct or discredit some of the more fanciful tales. On the contrary, he seemed to enjoy them.

His art of story-telling was so great that, even if one knew that the tale was fabricated, even if one had heard it a dozen times before, just listening to how he would bring it off *this* time was a most enjoyable experience. No wonder then that the interviewer was not always aware when facts were left behind and fiction entered. And so, Flaherty became a legend in his lifetime.

Simultaneously he was also hailed as the "Father of the Documentary Film," as the man who "merges himself into the life of the people and brings back a dramatic record of their daily lives." Today, more than thirteen years after Flaherty's death, it must be confusing to young film students who try to reconcile Flaherty's public image, his "documentary approach" and the sometimes fanciful accounts of how he made his films, with the films themselves. The picture I had formed of Flaherty many years ago was based on just such publicity. It had no relation to reality. What confusion it caused in my mind and expectations when I started to work with him on *The Land*.

Flaherty would talk a great deal about possible future plans, about films he thought *ought* to be made by himself or others, but never about the work at hand. He let no one enter into his thinking process. He never explained how what had originated as a disjointed thought, gradually was shaped and elaborated into the form in which it ultimately appeared on the screen.* Some years after a film had been finished he would gradually come up with stories about the people, the places or incidents while on location, but these remained stories and did not touch on his thoughts or theories. The only documents which speak directly and truly for Flaherty himself are his films. They should be seen and studied with minds uncluttered by preconceptions about his "innocence," his "naïveté" or his

*See among others my own analysis on how the sequence of the lost and found racoon in *Louisiana Story* began and developed. MS now in archives of the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



"truly documentary approach." It is my opinion that none of these labels fit his films. The enthusiastic reporter who emphasizes the "documentary," actually leaves Flaherty's films open to attack. Flaherty himself would withdraw in embarrassed silence when other film-makers would argue the point with him. The following morning he would complain bitterly to me and ask: "What is the matter with these young fellows? Have they no imagination?"

When Flaherty was ready to begin shooting, his story-line had crystallized to a certain extent. Facts were interpreted and adapted by him and molded into elements of a world created by him, a world entirely his own, in which he firmly believed. These interpretations and adaptations, these new elements, now became the true facts of this new world, where he could indulge his need to turn away from the ugliness of the real world. That is why it is so misleading to call him a documentarian, probably the result of the label "father of the documentary" once applied to Flaherty by John Grierson. Though Flaherty might be considered the ancestor-figure for the documentary, though he got the documentary under way, he soon left the true documentary world for a universe of his own invention. His fantasy was plentiful. He was able to feed the transformation from fact to fable until he had formed an image that suited him and became part of *The World of Robert Flaherty*.

Of all his full-length films only *The Land* was a true documentary. But even here he could not refrain from a little adaptation to suit his fancy. I am referring to the sequence in which the old Negro dusts off the plantation bell. I was not on location when this sequence was filmed so that I am unable to prove that my assumption is correct. I base my judgment on long training to look at documentary and newsreel material as it comes from the camera and very seldom have I been wrong in spotting staged scenes.

No doubt the old Negro lived in the ruined mansion but my guess is that it was Flaherty's idea to make him dust off the bell. All scenes

(and re-takes) had the same characteristics: the old man waiting at the beginning of the takes for a command from the director to move toward the bell. And again, after dusting for a while, for an order to stop doing so. What he muttered under his breath was probably not: "Where have they all gone?" but rather a complaint about having to exert his old and tired limbs so much. Some call it the most poetic sequence in the film and some refer to it as an unforgettable moment. It was Flaherty's privilege to stage this incident and to make it part of his film but at close study there seems to be a departure from the style of the rest of the film. When I innocently asked Flaherty about it he did not answer and left the room. The difference in quality between the bell sequence and unrehearsed situations is clearly visible when one compares it with the scenes of the young boy asleep in a tent, nervously twitching his fingers in the motion of picking peas, or with that of the prematurely old, gaunt young woman who turns full face to the camera, staring at it angrily while she waits in line to receive her small dole of surplus commodities. For neither sequence were there duplicate shots. These scenes are not poetic. They are unforgettable because of their stark reality. They cry out "HUNGER-POVERTY-ABUSE." The shocking truth leaps from the screen and needs no further elaboration. The boy, a child too young for such exploitation, cannot stop picking and his exhausted sleep gives no rest, while the young woman, in all the dignity she can muster in her cast-off life, shows her resentment at being made a potential subject for pity.

Robert Flaherty started *The Land* in the early summer of 1939 for the United States Film Service, then under the direction of Pare Lorentz. At the beginning of the new fiscal year, however, Congress failed to appropriate new funds for this agency and production of *The Land* was shifted to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration under Henry Wallace, then Secretary of Agriculture.

The vast farming operations in the Middle-

and North-West were thriving and producing an abundance of food with the help of newly invented machinery. A migrant labor force, the result of this mechanization in the fields, increased by indigent farmers who could no longer make a living on their home-farms with obsolete production methods, on soil already greatly eroded, swelled the ranks of the seasonal crop-pickers and roamed the country like gypsies.

During his first trip into the field Flaherty photographed mostly the richness of the land: the vast cornfields and mechanical pickers in Iowa; the enormous wheatfields and combines in the North-West, the huge granaries in Duluth. Rich crops everywhere. From there he went into the cotton country and finally, further West, came to the migrants working in the immense vegetable fields.

I began work on *The Land* early in March of 1940, having just finished in Hollywood the editing and scoring of *The Four Hundred Million* for Joris Ivens who, in turn, had left for Ohio to film *Power and the Land* for the Rural Electrification Administration. One morning the telephone rang in my New York apartment. A voice said that he was Robert Flaherty, calling from Washington where he had returned with 75,000 feet of film. Would I please come to edit it for him. I was unprepared but attracted and I must have answered "yes" because I went. I did not really know him though I had seen him on occasion at large gatherings, both here and in Europe and I admired him distantly as one does the famous film-makers of the world.

Thus far I had worked independently with my own crew, or in collaboration with Joris Ivens. Now I was to face an eminent filmmaker whose work methods I did not know, with whose ideas I was unfamiliar, and by whose reputation I was overwhelmed. Upon arrival in Washington I found a note in my hotel, inviting me to come for dinner that night. I met him for the first time, face to face, at a small French restaurant on Connecticut Avenue, surrounded by a group of friends. All

evening, until very late at night, he talked and told stories about *Nanook*, the Arctic, or the feasts the Polynesian chiefs had given him during the filming of *Moana*. Not a word was said about work on *The Land*. I thought it unusual that a man, engaged in the making of a film on such complex social and economic issues, could set aside his thoughts so completely when most film-makers would not have stopped talking about their problems and frustrations. I found Flaherty's disengagement extraordinary.

Then came my first work-day at the Department of Agriculture. Fighting my way through the miles of somber corridors along which I was to tramp so often during the next twelve months, I felt uneasy and slowed down once in a while. I tried to prepare some questions which would sound intelligent, I wanted to make a good impression. Finally I found his room. There he was, sitting behind a large desk, reading the morning newspaper. "Hello," he said cheerfully, getting up and extending his hand, "your name is too difficult so I'll call you Helen, O.K.?" and then, without pause or interruption, held forth on the bad state of the world. This took several hours of the first morning (and was to take as many hours of every following day so long as the film lasted). Then he said abruptly: "Come on, let us screen some film."

It took us several days to screen through most of the rushes. In the office I found a long "script" written by someone in the Department of Agriculture. It did not look much used and appeared to have little connection with the rushes I was seeing. During these screenings I waited for a word of explanation from Flaherty as to what some of the scenes represented, expected him to disclose his plans, hoped for some word of enlightenment as to what he had in mind. But he just sat there, rubbing the left hand through that fringe of white hair, smoking and groaning. Back in the office, after some more desperate sighs, he would start his monologue again, repeating almost verbatim a news report he had read about the war in Europe. He would also speak

in general terms about the fantastic abundance he had seen during the shooting. "There really is enough food in the United States to feed every man, woman, and child in the country," he would repeat. Other topics he continued mentioning were: the waste of human lives, the destructive influence of civilization, and the killing of human skills and crafts through the introduction of machines; but on these subjects we had as yet no film. He would repeat this day in and day out, by telephone if I had not yet come in, over and over again, until it became an incantation. There were variations sometimes but the nuances were so slight that they were hardly noticeable. Very, very slowly he would extract from it always the same sentences. The subtle inflections of his voice shifted a little to this word, then to that word until, in the end, they had affixed themselves to their chosen syllables, not to be changed again. This experience made me decide at the time of recording that only Flaherty himself could do justice to his commentary. Though his voice, technically, was far from perfect, no one could improve on his inflections, his cadence, or his feeling for the subject. The best actor could only achieve an imitation. But I did not understand all this during those first weeks. I was too inexperienced and too new to his working methods to realize that there was a connection between his monologues and the film.

After about three weeks we had done no more than screen the same material over and over and still he never came to the point where he would make suggestions, outline a possible narrative, or divulge his intentions. Each time when the lights would go on again in the screening-room he would groan: "My God, what are we going to do with all that stuff?" How would I know, if he did not? It puzzled me that a man who could quote lengthy reports he had just read with an almost photographic exactness, seemed unable to remember scenes he had filmed. What was he looking for, or was he simply staring himself blind on scenes he did not know what to do with? I

gradually became familiar with content and subject-matter of all the raw material, longed to edit them but refrained from making the smallest suggestions because they might be contrary to his plans. It had to be *his* film, not mine. All seemed so hopeless because I could not get him to talk and he would not reveal what went on in his head as far as the film was concerned. In desperation I wrote to Joris Ivens explaining that all Flaherty did was talk about the war and attack machines in the morning, screen the same stuff all over again in the afternoon and tell stories about *Elephant Boy* in the evening, but never, never a word about what kind of a film he was trying to make. I could see, I wrote, that he might not need a script but he ought to have a plan or at least an *idea*! What did Flaherty want from me? Companionship to relieve the boredom of looking at uncut scenes all afternoon? Ivens, who does not like to write letters and shifts the ones he receives from pocket to pocket until they are beyond answering, wired back: "Observe, look, listen. Love, Joris."

Observe, look, listen. That was what I had been doing all along, without results. It took a lot more time before I understood Flaherty. To my great relief he soon went away on his second shooting-trip. Before he left I asked the inevitable question: "What shall I do with all the film we have and all the stuff you are going to send me?" "Oh? Well, you just go ahead," he said. During his absence I screened *Nanook* and *Moana* repeatedly, trying to see if I could discover any particular method in his assembly that could be applied to *The Land*. But there was too much disparity between the themes and it was no help to notice that, whenever he got stuck with the visual story line in these two silent films, he would flash a title on the screen and proceed until he got stuck again. I occupied myself with an initial selection and grouping of our rushes. If there were enough scenes on certain subjects I would put the sequence in a chronological order, editing it in the longest possible form. I juxtaposed scenes in trial form and made notes for sug-

gestions on possible interrelationships between sequences. Much more I could not do without danger of violating Flaherty's intentions—if he had any.

To make matters more complicated, the war in Europe was spreading, America became gradually more involved, and the directives of the Department of Agriculture grew vaguer. The first signs appeared that the government was losing interest in our production. When Flaherty had started the film a year earlier, millions had been homeless. With the war spreading, war industries expanding, and armies and navies needing new recruits, the legions of unemployed were being absorbed gradually into the labor and fighting forces while land that had lain fallow was put back into production.

Flaherty, who had continued to follow the crops and the pickers, returned to Washington. It is impossible for me to say now, how or when the subtle change came when I first thought that I had begun to understand him. I listened very carefully to everything he said no matter how many times he seemed to repeat himself. Certain remarks about subjects which did not seem related at that moment, slight changes in the way he repeated something he had told the previous night, changes in emphasis, differences of inflection, these would come back to me while we were screening and seemed to have a distant relationship to what happened on the screen. Some previously unnoticed deeper meaning in the scene pushed itself to the foreground. It was not that I could not look before. It was that I had been looking at the rushes through *my* eyes because Flaherty could not or would not give me a clue.

My association with Joris Ivens was of such long standing and so close that I looked at his raw material through *our* eyes. We understood each other's intentions perfectly and lengthy discussions were not necessary. Half a word was sometimes sufficient to render a meaning, or the mention of a single scene would be the answer to a long unsolved problem. Together we had evolved a style. While at the beginning

of our collaboration I would take most of Ivens' ideas, through the years he would accept increasingly more of mine.

Now I was just beginning to look through Flaherty's eyes, slowly discovering the signs which would give direction for the editing of the film with his story, his vision and his opinion. When I thought I was on the right track I would ask questions. But Flaherty detested direct questions about film theories and became almost inarticulate. One had to go slowly, 'round-about, and approach the subject gradually and subtly. But more than asking, one had to watch him. Flaherty would never come into the cutting room. When I had assembled some part of the film and did not want to proceed beyond a certain point I would ask him to come to the projection room. With one eye I would watch the screen, with the other one Flaherty. What he did not say was written all over his face during these screenings: the way he put his hand through his hair or squashed out that eternal cigarette; the way he shifted position on the chair, sometimes rubbing his back against its rungs as if it were itching, these gestures would speak more than a torrent of words. After some time I came to understand that he transposed his thoughts. His monologues about the war, his preoccupation with the machine, were an indirect way of expressing what he wanted to say in the film. Gradually I was able to relate these expressions to the film material and learned to read the inspiration he sought in his scenes.

Possibly the Agricultural Adjustment Administration had been confronted too suddenly with the task of producing a film. Maybe they had hoped that Flaherty could be restricted to the subject of their obsession: the Ever-ready Granaries. One of the most barbarous wars in history had transformed the army of unemployed into a colossal labor force and the AAA did not want to be reminded of its agricultural dilemma. The content of the film and reality constantly clashed. Production had to come to an end quickly with so many reels of

"film" entered on the books in exchange for so much money spent.

In later years Flaherty never spoke to me about *The Land* yet it must have been a significant and lasting experience for him. When first I met him in Washington there always would be stories about past films. There were no funny stories connected with the filming of *The Land*. Flaherty liked to settle down where life was peaceful and where he could concentrate on what was graceful and beautiful, turning away from all that was ugly in the world. But during his journey through the country at that time life was not beautiful, not peaceful. He could not come to rest long enough anywhere. He had to keep going, follow the crops, follow the pickers. "Like locusts they move on when the fields were stripped," he said.

It has often been hinted that Flaherty was only too glad to get this job after having been pretty hard up for a while in London, yet he could have rejected the assignment and the conditions under which he had to work, or quit midway when no one in the government seemed to be interested any longer. It is not so long ago that I screened my copy of *The Land*. I remember how shocked I was, seeing it again after all these years. How emotion-packed are some sequences and how incredibly bad, empty and contradictory others. The film is no more than the record of a journey, putting most of the blame for the plight of the migratory workers on "the Machine"—a simplification of cause and effect. The film takes no position.

My report is mostly about what Flaherty did *not* say and never will say and though *The Land* may be no film, it is Flaherty's badge of courage.

The Land was given a prestige showing at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, then withdrawn from circulation. During the remaining war years I made films for the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (Nelson Rockefeller), the United States Signal Corps, the Office of War Information, and the Nether-

lands East Indies Government. I moved between Hollywood and New York during that time and saw Flaherty only occasionally. He could not earn a living making films for any of the government agencies. He might have been the last and greatest film director on earth, his special talents were unsuited for wartime when films often had to be made under duress, when decisions had to be taken quickly and there was little time for contemplation. And "Flaherty was slow." So he sold a story to the *Reader's Digest* for their series "The Most Wonderful Character I Have Known." His name was worth a check from the magazine. He asked me to help him—they had given him a deadline. I did not have much time but I said I would, setting aside a few days, guessing that would do for a short story. My idea was to get him over the hurdle of that first inertia. I had planned to let him tell the story while I, as well as possible, would set it down on paper, intending to return this first draft to him for revision, to be completed quietly by himself. We never progressed beyond the first paragraph. In spite of his natural gift for words, it is the *spoken* word that he is the master of. As with the commentary for *The Land* he repeated this first paragraph over and over until it had gone through that crystallization process, to take its final form, emphasis and inflection. But it was beautiful only when he spoke it. On paper the voice that cast the spell was missing. It seemed just another sentence. Eventually he wrote the story by himself but it lacked all the beauty and flavor of his spoken tales.

An old Chinese proverb says: one picture is worth a thousand words. Flaherty could do better. With only a few spoken words he could conjure up the most engaging pictures. Conversely he could intensify the effect of an already magnificent scene to unlimited depth by adding a few words, as in the opening sequence of *Louisiana Story*. Introducing us to the flora and fauna and atmosphere of the bayous, we discover in the swamp-forest, far away, appearing and disappearing behind the

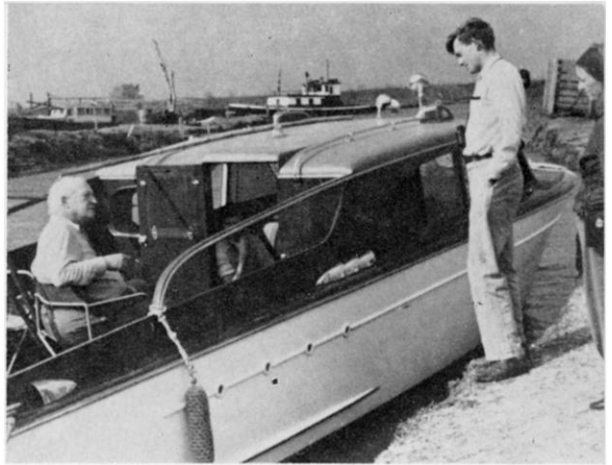
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moss-hung trees, a little boy paddling his pirogue. When we come closer, the boy is seen only from the back. We still haven't really seen his face. Flaherty's voice says: "His name is Alexander, Napoleon, Ulysses, Latour . . ." These three names, deliberately pronounced and separated, spoken with a soft almost mysterious voice—the combination of picture and words evokes the mystery with which Flaherty wanted to surround the scene. The mood is established, the basis for a fairy-tale set. From now on all is acceptable.

All of us during the production participated in dreaming up a name for the boy, writing down those which were associated with French heritage or Southern heroes. It was left to Flaherty to pick out the right names, in the right combination and right order. It was he who found the real cadence.

Early in 1946 Flaherty had gone on an exploratory trip for the Standard Oil Company to see if a story could be filmed in the oil-fields. When his proposals were accepted he started to form a crew to go on location in the Louisiana bayous where his story took place. He came to my studio one day to tell me the good news, then asked if I would come with him and help make the film. This time he wanted me, not only as editor but also as associate producer. I told him that my current contract would run through August, if he could wait that long I would like to come. He agreed. I joined the crew in the little town of Abbeville in southern Louisiana on August 10, 1946. The film "actors" had been chosen, a certain amount of random shooting had already taken place.

In general the working pattern during *Louisiana Story* was much like that during *The Land*. The crew went out shooting during the day, evenings and rainy days were spent almost exclusively in screening rushes. Because *Louisiana Story* covered less geographical territory than *The Land*, had more of a planned story line, and I joined the production-group early, the editing did not have such a chaotic beginning. And now I knew Flaherty better, knew that he would continually depart from



Flaherty, Ricky Leacock, Helen Van Dongen

his prepared story whenever he would accidentally encounter something that struck his fancy.

Our rushes were airshipped daily to New York and the laboratory returned them daily, giving one time to absorb more leisurely their content, replace them in their proper, though always temporary, categories, to plan their potentialities, or simply to fill them for future reference. The number of scenes grew and the subjects they covered increased. It is not necessary here to repeat the details of production.* I prefer to focus on Flaherty himself.

He would continue to look at the rushes night after night. He seemed happiest when they were screened the way they were shot. Untouched, unorganized, unshortened, they contained all the possibilities, all the potentialities of all the ideas he had in his mind, and with his unlimited fantasy and vision he saw behind the screen, behind this incompletable material the story he had envisioned. "It's going to be great," he would say in general. But when the scenes were separated into categories, or put in a somewhat chronological order, though still in full length, he began to worry. An "arrangement" had occurred, gaps began to

*See among others my article "Three Hundred and Fifty Cans of Film" in *The Cinema* 1951. Pelican Books.

show. The slight order disturbed the wild flight of fancy. His expectations began to fade. Having only the core, or even less of his future sequence, in order of eventual occurrence, without embellishment or transformation as yet, standing independently without juxtaposition to other sequences, they lacked the magic with which he wanted to imbue them. They brought him back to earth and he suffered physically. The circle always repeated itself: elation when seeing untouched rushes with all their promises; black moods and despair during the formation and growth of the sequence until that moment when the composition was fairly completed and he began to see that the magic he had wanted to instill had taken hold at some point. The sequence promised fulfillment. But somehow he always prolonged this process and delayed the moment of relief. One should not progress too quickly.

As a realistic matter of time was involved I could not forever let him indulge his enjoyment of unarranged rushes. Sometimes I suspected that he would be perfectly content to do nothing but shoot, screen whatever he shot, and bewitch everyone with his enthusiasm about "what a wonderful film this will make." Naturally I looked a great deal by myself at all the scenes we began to gather. Half of the large porch surrounding the house had been screened in and closed off. It was my cutting room and off-limits to everyone. It was the only place where I could work undisturbed. Flaherty came into it only once: to have the picture taken which is now the frontispiece of that large volume *The Film Till Now* by Paul Rotha and Richard Griffith. He avoided coming in because it would involve him in details he apparently did not want to know about. I would search for scenes which might complete a sequence or give it just that atmosphere which was still lacking. Then I would go to Flaherty with suggestions with which I hoped to get his reaction. I often met with a cold shoulder; perhaps he thought that I wanted to take the initiative away from him or wanted to push my ideas to the foreground. "Give me the rushes for

screening tomorrow, I want to look at them," he would counter and then, as if to protect them from contamination, would not return them for a while.

But I had to know whether my ideas would work or not. I would make the sequence as I thought of it—in a fairly long form—then confront him with it. That was a mistake. He would be too startled seeing his scenes in an unfamiliar arrangement and could not concentrate. I had hoped to trick him into a discussion, to tell me if he liked it and, if not, why not. Instead, he would get up and walk out. He would do the same if I asked him to shoot something I thought was needed. Flaherty instinctively revolted against anything resembling organization. Eventually he might shoot what I wanted but it would be months later when he had felt the need for it.

As time passed I would try out my ideas by myself. If I thought they worked I would put the sequence back the way Flaherty had last seen it, always leaving in just *one* change, making it as perfect and as smooth as it ought to be in the final version, meanwhile also always tightening my composition just a little more every time. If I had achieved what I had in mind I would hand the sequence to Flaherty for screening and if he did not get restless right away I knew I had been successful. I was wise enough not to point out what I had done. I would never work too long on one sequence but shift from one to another so that progression would not be noticeable within too short a time. Then would come that encouraging moment when he would exclaim: "She's going to come, she's going to come," referring to the sequence he had just seen. Then, somewhat with mistrust: "Did you change anything?" and I would say: "No, I don't think so. Just tightened it up a little." Because of his apprehensions, his doubts and hesitations the process of editing dragged considerably. Was it because two scenes in true juxtaposition, each newly composed sequence, brought the film closer to finality? Did he want to prolong production time in order to make the long periods

of unproductivity between films shorter? He knew the disappointment of not readily finding a new sponsor.

Flaherty gave me a free hand in only three sequences of *Louisiana Story*. This was essentially a silent film and he was not very familiar with the technique of sound or with the qualitative change that takes place when the right sound is added to the right scene. The sequence of the presents in the kitchen was primarily determined by the dialogue which, when repeated in re-takes, was never twice the same. The final form was arrived at by matching the best of the dialogue with the best parts of the picture, cutting away from the actor's faces when necessity demanded. As we had no sound-editing equipment in Louisiana he did not see this sequence until I showed it to him after his return to New York.

The second one was the oil-drilling sequence now usually referred to as the "ballet of the rough-necks." Here the editing depends on the interplay between sound and picture. Without the sound the picture is unsatisfactory and incomplete. The track is composed of sounds, general and in close-up, each with its own characteristics, which had been originally recorded on the derrick by our sound engineer Benji Donniger and his assistant Lennie Starck. I edited the sequence, without the sound, in Louisiana, showed it to Flaherty and explained how it would be changed by adding sound. He felt somewhat let down that there was a part in his film where he would not have the final say. Reluctantly but graciously he surrendered his prerogative. When he saw the sequence in New York in its combined form during the recording, he was elated.

And finally, the third sequence: the introduction to the film, the lyrical overture. The scenes out of which this sequence was composed came from everywhere. I scanned all the unused material to find the right scenes. I made it slowly and gradually, showing it to

him at every stage whenever I had introduced new material. He never objected to any changes I made. Apparently it grew the way he wanted it. Was it because time and money began to run short and the film had to be brought to completion? Or did he no longer object to such close participation by someone else?

William Whitebait writes in *Sight and Sound*, Oct.-Dec. 1951:

... so fittingly and unobtrusively made is the whole piece [film] that one never thinks to pick and choose among the several skills displayed ... the depth and beauty of landscape—how much does that owe to camerawork, to the soundtrack, rich and chary of speech, and to the lovely score of Mr. Virgil Thomson? What part, in such sequences as the long struggle with the crocodile and the plunging of the oilshafts, has been played by that little-known hand, the editor's? ...

Mr. Whitebait's question has been repeated to me many times and in many forms. Though Flaherty did some camerawork himself during *Louisiana Story*, he depended almost entirely on Richard [Rickey] Leacock's skill and artistry. I have explained somewhat in this article and in more detailed form in other articles* my own part in the production. I would like to give the following answer to all questioners: it is unimportant how large precisely was our share in the final product. One gives as much as possible, as much as is beneficial to the final form of the film, without overshadowing or obstructing the director's intentions. The director chooses his collaborators because they have skills and talents which he wants and needs. Flaherty took from us as much as he needed, as much as he wanted to put into his film, as much as was necessary for a film which he could not make alone. Neither Leacock nor I were mere technicians. Flaherty had asked each one of us to help. Our consent implied that we would try to suffuse our skills with his. It requires iron discipline to keep tight rein

*See pp. 135-155 in *The Technique of Film Editing* compiled by Karel Reisz (Focal Press, London, 1953) and my production diary, now in the archives of the film library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

on one's own imagination and to subdue part of one's self when necessary. Ours was not a glamorous role. Flaherty was no fiery orator who could spellbind with passionate impromptu speeches. He inspired but one had to dig and scratch to find the exact signs. The final realization of his unlimited fantasy came to him slowly. Flaherty himself sweated out each sequence, each thought. It took time and thought and labor and exertion from all of us to make this film which, at first sight, appears so easy of construction and so simple in its development. Flaherty himself recognized the value of the co-workers he had selected and was generous with praise. How often would he say to me: "I don't know what I would have done without Rickey [Richard Leacock]." When introducing me to someone he would usually add: "I could not have made the film without her." I think each one admitted with pride: "Yes, I worked on the film."

When I accepted Flaherty's invitation to join in this production I looked forward to my stay in Louisiana with a certain excitement. If the head of the expedition was known as a man who merged himself into the life of the people then, certainly, the members of his crew would share in this experience. Flaherty had lived a long time with the Eskimos and depended upon them. In Samoa he was an honored guest of the Polynesians. Making *Man of Aran* he lived among the Islanders. From these facts, oversimplified, I expected our home in Abbeville to be constantly overrun by the children of the neighborhood, by the more colorful characters of the small town, and by the large families of our "actors." The large mansion, already in decline, which he had rented at the edge of town was inhabited only by Flaherty and his immediate family, Rickey Leacock and his wife, Sidney Smith (Rickey's assistant), and myself. Lionel Leblanc (father in the film) and the local employees lived with their own families in a different part of town. The Boy was boarded out to a Cajun family near by. Once two friends of mine who were

driving across the continent spent the night with us; the rest of the visitors were friends of the Flaherty family or people in one way or another connected with the Standard Oil Company, sponsor of the film. When lunch was eaten on location, all ate together. Lionel Leblanc was sometimes offered a drink at the house after a day's work, but I do not remember that he was ever invited to sit down at our table to share our dinner. Once in a while we would go to the small restaurant in town to eat steak and play the one-armed bandits, but we had no contact with others present. We paid a courtesy visit to the McIlhennys, owners among other things of the tropical jungle gardens where most of our mysterious-looking scenes were filmed, and a few times we went to see Mr. and Mrs. Roane who owned a sugar plantation and factory near Jeanerette. Once old Mrs. McIlhenny came in her chauffeur-driven car to pay us a visit. Mrs. Flaherty had invited her to tea but forgot about it later and joined the crew on a three-day trip to Lake Charles and its alligator preserve and I was the only one at home to receive her. As long as I was in Louisiana, which was slightly over a year, there was nothing that resembled close contact with the local population. We were people who had come to make a motion picture and we remained outsiders. No doubt Flaherty absorbed a great deal of local color when he went on his first exploratory trip to the South but the superstitions touched upon in his film can be found in the books of local folklore. Once having decided upon his main theme he could struggle through the details of the written outline in the seclusion of his room. One could observe him for hours, sitting at a card table, laboring painfully and slowly giving birth to the child of his imagination.

It was often said that Flaherty was naive and looked upon the world with the innocent eyes of a child. It takes great sophistication to portray a world of one's own making then to display it seen by a child. His mind was not as innocent as a child's nor was he naive. He had a penetrating mind and acute powers of obser-

vation. He was fully aware of the miseries, struggles, and ugliness of the world but these embarrassed him. Whatever he thought of it in the privacy of his thinking he was unwilling to display these thoughts publicly. He averted his eye and his camera from trouble and sorrow and bitterness, chose instead situations where man could still meet a not too complex challenge. Be it tattooing to prove manhood or the hunt to stay alive (at least temporarily), his hero would come off the victor.

When reproached for going to far-away places or choosing primitive peoples, showing only the skillful and enchanting sides of life, leaving out all unpleasantness, Flaherty defended himself by saying that it was not their decadence which interested him but that, on the contrary, he wished to portray their inherent qualities as long as this was still possible before the white man annihilated them all. In doing so Flaherty escaped into a world of little contemporary significance. If events or customs were no longer so colorful or quaint as he would like them, he pushed back the calendar a hundred years or restored customs no longer observed. Even in a film as contemporary and realistic as *The Land* his mind could stray. I am referring to the scene in which a primitive (by today's standards) bulldozer is clearing a patch of land of a few small trees. "Take it to Kenya," he would exclaim, "what a Paradise you could open up." Though in the final commentary Kenya was replaced by "some new space in the world," this new space seemed more accessible to him than America where the machine for him was a symbol of the destruction of man's skill and eventually man's lives. And this was a long time before the independence of the African nations. While oil-drilling is contemporary to the time and place of *Louisiana Story*, it is used only as a vehicle to enhance the fantasy and magic of the wonderland through which his character moves. Here Flaherty took the final step.

The first version of *Nanook* (which burned up accidentally) was a factual account of what he had seen. He did not like it, as he said later,

because it looked like a travelogue. It was the first time Flaherty had used a camera to record what he had experienced but it did not satisfy his imagination. He had already discovered the potentialities of the camera which, added to that sensitive vision of his own eye and the powers of his own imagination, could create magic and tell "a story." The second *Nanook* became a conflict between the explorer-scientist who had been disciplined into giving facts and figures and the story-teller-turned-film-director who left out certain facts and emphasized others. Facts and figures, useful as they are to the mine-owners and fur-traders, were not exciting to Flaherty whose nature leaned more toward the dramatic. Certainly Revillon Frères had no objections to the omission of steeltraps. The ladies, enjoying the prowess of Nanook, might not feel so pleased if they saw how the foxes were caught whose pelts now adorned their shoulders. The story-teller won out over the scientist. The story-teller approximated reality, emphasized what would enhance his world, molded facts and transposed time until they would fit into the world of his own creation, omitting what would interfere.

All his films are variations on a theme: man's response to the challenge of nature. The careful student will notice, however, that in his films it is Flaherty who sets all the rules of the game. He creates the world, sets the challenge, and dominates the response and the victory. This is why his earlier films are sometimes so difficult to judge especially when they are presented as "documentary," when they are regarded as truthful accounts of the lives of peoples because their maker still had the reputation and renown of the explorer. His films are not the statements of the historian, they are creations of a story-teller. With *Louisiana Story* Flaherty drops all pretense, confesses that he helped nature along sometimes and admits freely that it is all a fable.

Flaherty was much like the minnesingers of a thousand years ago who had visited far-away lands and went from court to court, from hamlet to hamlet, to sing the praise of their

heroes and their fabulous exploits. As time went by and they repeated their songs they would add a little here, change a little there to suit their fancy. Those who had heard the tales would repeat them and embellish them in turn until the final product had no longer any resemblance to what once might have been true. But this does not prevent us from enjoying *King Arthur and the Round Table* or the *Song of Roland*. If Flaherty's films are regarded in this light they too can be enjoyed and savored for what they are: great and lasting contributions to the cinematographic treasures.

The day following the première of *Louisiana Story* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, I left for Europe. Flaherty had invited me for lunch at the Coffee House Club. During the meal he thrust a package at me. "Here," he said. It was a limited edition of a just-published cookbook, written by another member of the Club. I was particularly touched

because I had once deeply grieved him by setting down the rule that I would not accept any gifts from him. Flaherty was generous to a fault and his presents could be expensive. He was also extremely possessive and did not understand why one was not always willing to attend whenever he was holding court. It was to prevent too much intrusion upon my private life that I had to set down the rule of which I had to remind him so often.

The only physical objects I have to remind me of Flaherty are this cookbook and a dollar alarm-clock which he once lent me. It keeps time here in my little library in the Vermont woods where I am writing this piece. But the real legacy Robert Flaherty left me are the memories of enforced discipline, a quality he himself did not possess, of warm friendship, and of unrelenting and rewarding labor. I shall always see him, sitting in the midst of a crowd, casting a spell over friends, acquaintances, admirers or just the curious, come to hear him—a sensitive and lonely man.

ALBERT JOHNSON

The Negro in American Films: Some Recent Works

Nowadays, it seems that a majority of Americans are committed, one way or another, to accepting the social revolution of the American Negro, as well as the demands for total recognition on the part of Negroes in other parts of the world. Fourteen years ago, film critics thought it brave to acknowledge the "daring" racial themes handled in Hollywood films. But when seen in the light of today's violences, how very tame and naively well-intentioned those films seem! Actually, however, it is harder than ever before to truth-

fully dramatize the American Negro's dilemmas on stage or screen, because the angers are too intense. Even James Baldwin (heretofore the most eloquent literary spokesman for the Negro intellectual) created a polemical stageplay in *Blues for Mister Charlie*, a work that manages to endow the Negro with an unintentionally mock-epic stature, and brings a hysterical sort of animosity to his heroic quest for political and social equality. Despite cries for "moderation" from the conservative elements in America, this